DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 051 RC 021 760

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TITLE	Outdoor Education and the Development of Civic Responsibility. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-98-5
PUB DATE	1999-01-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002012
AVAILABLE FROM	Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1031 Quarrier St., Charleston, WV 25301-2314.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adventure Education; *Citizenship Responsibility; *Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; Environmental Education; *Experiential Learning; *Outdoor Education; Participatory Research; Relevance (Education); School Community Relationship; Service Learning; *Social Responsibility; *Student Development
IDENTIFIERS	Cultural Journalism; *Environmental Ethic

ABSTRACT

This digest suggests how outdoor education and experiential learning can develop in students a sense of community participation and set them on a path of strong participation and civic responsibility. Following definitions of outdoor education and experiential learning, various outdoor and experiential approaches are described. Adventure education encompasses activities that have a certain amount of stress or risk; stimulates development of students' interpersonal competencies, leadership skills, and self-confidence; and nurtures respect for and connections with nature and community. Cultural journalism helps students understand the place where they live, their connections through friends and relatives to others in the past and present community, and the value of community traditions. Closely related to cultural journalism, participatory research involves students and community members in framing and resolving local problems and issues. Participatory research projects promote a sense of justice and activism in social and environmental issues. Service learning provides direct benefits to communities, strengthens school-community bonds, and gives meaning to education for students. (Contains 16 references and 5 resource organizations.) (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

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January 1999

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by Judith A. Boss

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Outdoor Education and the Development of Civic Responsibility

by Judith A. Boss

Recently commentators have mourned the "disappearance of civic America," saying we are becoming a nation of civic couch potatoes (Tyack, 1997). Surveys suggest voters know little about what their legislators are doing (Harris, 1997). Other observers point out the importance of strong civic involvement for creating conditions—sometimes referred to as *social capital*—that support vital community life and thriving economies (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). This type of involvement includes participation in government, associations (for example, charitable, religious, athletic, environmental, or arts), and community and economic development. For students to grow into fully participating citizens, they need to find their place in this web of community life, and understand both the benefits and responsibilities of being part of it.

This Digest suggests how outdoor education and experiential learning can develop such understandings in students, and set them on a path of strong participation and civic responsibility.

Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning

Harvard educational psychologist Howard Gardner has found that scholastic knowledge "seems strictly bound to school settings" (1991, p. 122), while outdoor education fosters "connected knowing," where education is part of, rather than separate from, life. Unlike classroom learning, outdoor education uses the student's whole environment as a source of knowledge. The community, rather than the classroom, is the context of learning.

Outdoor education includes more than studies of nature, although learning about the environment is certainly an important aspect of this educational tradition. It encompasses the use of the outdoor environment—whether natural or man-made—to promote learning from experience and enrichment of nearly any subject in the curriculum. One of the originators of this approach to education, John Dewey (1938), envisioned the school as a miniature democratic society, with experiential learning as an essential component of civics education. Students prepare for adult civic responsibility by practicing it in the world around them. In outdoor education, students learn how to identify problems as well as how to work with government and civic groups in formulating and implementing solutions. Students become active participants in the democratic process, rather than simply passive observers.

Experiential learning has continued to gain advocates over the decades. Basically, it is learning by doing. Many recent innovations have strong ties to experiential learning: hands-on or active learning, cooperative learning, work-based learning, and service learning are examples. Through such experiences, students can learn mathematics, science, social and technology skills, and civics, among many other disciplines (Knapp, 1996).

Three Outdoor Education Approaches

This Digest focuses on three principal types of outdoor education commonly used to nurture civic responsibility in students: adventure education, cultural journalism and participatory research, and service learning. A resource list at the end of this Digest provides contact information for several organizations that can provide resources for interested educators and youth leaders.

Adventure education. Adventure education usually takes place outdoors, often in wilderness areas, and aims to teach environmental awareness and build self-confidence through activities that include a certain amount of stress or risk—such as rock climbing, ropes courses, and other carefully planned activities. Teachers or other adults interested in this approach require intensive training, usually involving special certification.

Perhaps the best known organization practicing adventure education is Outward Bound. A meta-analysis of 96 studies published between 1968 and 1994 concludes that Outward Bound programs stimulate the development of interpersonal competencies, enhance leadership skills, and have positive effects on adolescents' senses of empowerment, self-control, independence, self-understanding, assertiveness, and decision-making skills (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997). These are important findings given that low participation in civic life often occurs because citizens feel powerless to bring about changes.

Outward Bound instructor Randolph DeLay discovered that most new teen participants in his program "conceived of nature as a place undisturbed, unfamiliar, 'out there,' with few or no people, and without human-made things. Therefore, in these teens' minds there was no nature at home and therefore no real reason to care for the environment outside of the wilderness" (1996, p. 79). Outdoor education nurtures a respect for our connectedness with nature and the wider community. This connectedness flows over into an awareness of our relatedness to others in the community (Fouhey & Saltmarsh, 1996).

Cultural journalism and participatory research. While adventure education programs can help youth discover their individual strengths and capacity for leadership, and connection to nature and community, this second approach helps students understand the place where they live, and their connections through relatives and friends to others in the community—past, present, and future. Cultural journalism can help students become part of a "community of memory," a group of people who live willingly—though not necessarily unquestioningly—within the protection of collective traditions (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). In a society that promotes individualism in countless ways, understanding the value of certain civic traditions can provide the basis for cooperation and mutual support.

Perhaps the best-known example of this approach was Foxfire, in which student research in the community eventually produced a best-selling magazine and series of books. This approach to history and education, as explained by Tierney (1992), has deep roots in genealogical societies, local history commemorative pamphlets, testimonies collected by abolitionists, and the various projects, slave narratives, state guides, and folklore studies of the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal. (p. 25)

Participatory research is closely related, but tends to

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involve more contemporary issues. Put simply, it is research conducted by people who are affected by an issue, problem, or concern. For students, this could involve (1) group discussion to define an issue and identify expertise in the group or community, (2) public meetings to involve community members in the research, (3) research teams to share responsibility for the research, (4) open-ended surveys to gather information about how a wider range of people view the issue, (5) community seminars for focused discussion, (6) fact-finding tours to various parts of the community or other communities, and (7) communicating the newly gathered information (Participatory Research Network, 1982; Tierney, 1992). The Highlander Center has offered training to community leaders in this approach for many decades.

This form of outdoor education helps develop a sense of justice, which is essential to civic responsibility. For example, Whatcom Middle School, Western Washington State University, and Washington State Campus Compact collaborated to create an eighth-grade curriculum on environmental facets of watershed conservation and civic responsibilities inherent in environmental stewardship. The project prompted students to become politically involved in protecting and maintaining a local stream and fish hatchery threatened by industrial pollution.

Activism springing from such projects may include writing letters, volunteering in a community organization, or talking to others about environmental justice. A study of environmentalists, such as John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold, can provide role models. This sort of experiential learning helps students respond effectively to problems by providing opportunities for them to apply their knowledge in real-life situations. Awareness of environmental or other issues without knowledge of how to bring about positive changes may leave students feeling frustrated and powerless. Students with opportunities to participate directly in the democratic process feel more politically effective than most adults (Center for Civic Education, 1994). By their participation, students learn which government and private agencies are interested in environmental issues and what resources they offer. Once they understand these mechanisms in one arena–such as protection of the environment–they are better prepared to engage in other areas of civic problem solving.

Service learning. Civic responsibility also entails a willingness to engage in community service, as well as political activism. Service learning is one form of outdoor education that has been well developed over the past decade, with a number of organizations offering resources. Proponents of service learning report benefits to schools, communities, and young people. Schools enjoy increased community support and closer working relationships with parents of participating students. Communities benefit directly from the various services provided by students, and indirectly because students gain a sense of civic efficacy, and the attitude that they should, can, and will have an impact on civic affairs. Students find a sense of meaning in education when they examine firsthand the community social problems, or when they participate in projects to address problems (Garman, 1995).

Components of successful service learning programs include (1) clearly articulated goals that stand a reasonable chance of being accomplished, (2) projects of real consequence to the community, (3) student tasks involving real responsibility and trust, (4) initial and ongoing involvement of community members in setting directions for the project, (5) support of the community, (6) initial and ongoing involvement of students in selecting and designing the project, (7) developmental appropriateness, (8) tangible results, and (9) clear connections to classroom learning (Garman, 1995).

Service learning projects can be completed in a day or over the long term. Projects such as a community garden or cleanup can be done on or near the school grounds. Following are examples of outdoor education programs:

The Stream Bank Initiative is a collaborative project by schools in South Royalton, Vermont. Twenty middle and high school students planted trees and grass along an 800-foot stretch of streambed to stabilize erosion and provide a buffer between the river and a town recreation area. Local, private, state, and federal contributors funded the project (Stine, 1997).

At Rosemead High School, in California, 40 high school students collaborated with 8 landscape architecture students and faculty to study and replant an area around the school that had been paved to save maintenance costs. Students learned about the importance of trees and plants in filtering polluted air and preventing erosion (Stine, 1997).

Conclusion: Recommendations for Future Directions

Outdoor education can be an effective bridge to civic participation. But efforts to involve students in experiential learning in all its forms require planning and skill on the part of educators. Fortunately, a growing body of literature and organizations stand by ready to assist.

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Resources

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Center for Civic Education. 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302-1467; http://www.civiced.org/

Foxfire Fund, Inc. P.O. Box 541, Mountain City, GA 30562-0541; telephone 706-746-5828; http://www.foxfire.org

Highlander Research and Education Center. Route 3, Box 370, New Market, TN 37820; telephone (615) 933-3443; E-mail hrec@igc.apc.org

Outward Bound USA. 384 Field Point Road, Greenwich, CT 06830; http://209.115.22.205/

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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EDO-RC-98-5